

LEBANON : A SYSTEM AT STAKE

When Lebanon is mentioned, it is commonly associated with freedom and democracy; this association is often underscored in attempts to bring out Lebanon's peculiarity, distinctiveness, or — as some would rather put it, perhaps with a touch of chauvinism - edge of superiority in the Arab world.

Freedom Aplenty

« Lebanon » wrote a British author in 1974, on the eve of the great crisis, « is unique among Arab states in two fundamental aspects : firstly its religious plurality ... and secondly its status as a parliamentary democracy with universal suffrage and a presidential system... Lebanon has throughout remained a citadel of free thought; and free expression. The cohesiveness of its people and the strength of national identity are of striking maturity, against all the odds, in a land of diverse allegiances.... » (1).

There is, indeed, an abundance of freedoms afforded by the system applied in Lebanon, including freedom of belief, expression, and action.

In Lebanon, anyone may adhere to the religion, creed, or faith of his choice or — as is almost invariably the norm — of his birth. Christianity and Islam, identified with a diversity of sectarian communities, have a long standing of coexistence in Lebanon. There was at one time also a small Jewish community. Although it had consistently enjoyed the same official recognition as the other communities and has never been exposed to any undue treatment, the Jewish population started dwindling when the State of Israel was established in adjoining Palestine in 1948, and the few-thousands Jews left on the eve of the crisis have since voluntarily trickled out of the country.

In Lebanon, all may freely exercise their religious tenets, perform their religious rites, and carry on their religious ceremonies. All may

lecture delivered at Wayne State university, Detroit, Michigan, May 15, 1984. (Page 9).

(1) George T. Muray, *Lebanon. The new Future*, Thomson - Rizk, 1974, PP. 13 - 14 .

freely articulate their beliefs and preach their ideas in religious congregations and through the media.

Political life has been no less indulging . One is free to entertain and voice one's own ideas and opinions on practically any political subject. In normal times, parliamentary elections are periodically held—once every four years—in which universal suffrage is observed, and the people have in principle a chance to express their free will by voting for the candidates of their preference in their specific electoral districts.

Party life , however , has never been able to thrive in Lebanon . Although the decade preceding the crisis witnessed a marked proliferation of parties, filling a whole spectrum of shadings from extreme right to extreme left, the party system could never take a real hold or assert an effective sway over the political life in the country. Traditional family influence—bordering on political feudalism— and sectarianism have proved to be too strongly entrenched in the fabric of society to be dislodged or even seriously challenged by the emergent parties in the political life of Lebanon.

There were times when certain parties were explicitly banned or outlawed in Lebanon—the Communist Party and the Syrian National Socialist Party being two notable cases in point. These two parties happen to be the only ones in the country to develop any significant presence which has not been built around either a sectarian cause or traditional family leadership.

Today, the political scene in Lebanon is all but completely dominated by three main, para-military parties : the Lebanese Phalanges (a Maronite Christian party), the Amal Movement (a Shi'i Muslim party) and the Progressive Socialist Party (a Druze Muslim party, controlled by a traditional family leadership). This three-tier party dominance paradoxically serves to corroborate the observation already made, namely that sectarianism and affiliation with traditional family leaderships are still the dominant factors in the Lebanese political scene.

Evidently¹, all three confessionally-oriented parties owe their rapid growth, and hence their present sizes and uncontested roles, to the crisis. Amal was actually born in 1975, the first year of the crisis. The phalanges could not have more than seven members of their ranks elected to a parliament of 99 in the last ballot to be held before the crisis, i. e. in 1972, and perhaps hardly any of them by the sheer strength of their party's following. Election alliances were probably the more decisive factor in the overall outcome. The Progressive Socialists had only two of their members elected to Parliament in that

year, including their party's leader who, an outstanding national figure in his own right at both the Lebanese and Arab levels, belonged to one of the most prominent Lebanese families cherishing deep roots in traditional communal leadership.

Thus, the current domination of the scene by largely confessionally-oriented parties serves, in reality, to confirm rather than refute the fact that sectarianism is still the most forceful factor in the country's political life. Nevertheless – barring the restrictions imposed on certain parties at various intervals in recent history and the discrimination often practised by the Government, favoring or combating particular parties or party lines—there is no denying the fact that the political parties have, on the whole, enjoyed a great deal of freedom in Lebanon.

Freedom of the press has always been treasured as an inalienable concomitant of political freedom. The record of full freedom enjoyed by the press has been marred only by short spells of abortive attempts to subject the press to censorship in 1977 and 1983.

The economy has been no less liberal than the other realms of life in Lebanon. Liberalism has, in fact, been carried to extremes in certain spheres of economic activity reminiscent in a way of the classical notion of *laissez - faire*.

Freedom of enterprise has been Lebanon's salient hallmark. Anyone is free to establish any kind of business anywhere in Lebanon with very limited constraints, mostly connected with questions of ecology, and free reign has unswervingly been given to both foreign exchange and capital movements. Foreign trade is carried on with very few restrictions. Imports are government-regulated only in a very few exceptional cases where, for example, the market of a particular commodity is of a non-competitive nature, such as petroleum products, or where the price of a staple, such as wheat and flour, is subsidized. The tariff structure is on the whole relatively very low, and taxation is generally far from being cumbersome.

This general ambiance of freedom had over a period exceeding two decades preceding the Lebanese crisis, virtually been Lebanon's greatest economic asset, practically its gold mine, inasmuch as it had been the major factor in turning Lebanon into a veritable haven for both men and capital fleeing the hazards of relative instability which started haunting various countries of the Middle East following the Palestine catastrophe in 1948 and as a consequence of it.

Democracy in Jeopardy

Democracy is often countenanced as the constitutional, legal, and

institutional framework for the exercise of freedom in a society. Abundant as have been the freedoms afforded by the system applied in Lebanon, democracy seems to have been lacking. At least three phenomena stand pragmatically in evidence of this fact, namely the nearly complete absence of political accountability, the system's failure to exhibit the kind of resilience characteristic of democracy, and the absence of equal opportunity. Further elucidation of these phenomena may help to spotlight some of the basic underlying factors in the devastating crisis underway since 1975.

Democracy is intrinsically identifiable with public accountability under which responsibility is inextricably associated with authority. This has obviously not been the case in Lebanon. The stars of the political scene in 1943, the year of Independence, or the survivors amongst them, are themselves still the stars of the scene now, over forty years later. Those who played a role – creditable as it was, to be sure – in winning Lebanon's Independence from the French mandate, have been largely the same men who led their people through a short civil war in 1958, through a sharp economic tremor in 1966 - 1968 following the Intra Bank collapse, through a major political crisis precipitated in 1969 by clashes between the Lebanese Army and the fledgeling Palestinian resistance movement, through the intermittent turmoils of the early 1970's, and last but not least through the current devastating crisis. Lebanon, apparently, still counts for its salvation from its present tribulation largely on the same group of people or, stepping into the shoes of those who died in the meantime, their kins or descendants. In a more genuine democracy, lesser political aberrations than the events just cited would have encumbered the careers of the leading politicians of a given epoch, and would have sooner or later shoved them out of the scene. Instead, in Lebanon's kind of political world, as a cynic would put it, none would be held accountable for a mishap ; all would get credit for redressing it.

Another manifestation of the dubiousness of the democratic character of the system in application has been its patent lack of resilience. Significantly missing has been a built - in system of checks and balances that a true democracy would ordinarily carry in its folds.

Unlike Western democracies, where the advent of a problem is likely to trigger some corrective, remedial, or pre-emptive mechanism, such as calling for new parliamentary elections, a change of government, a cabinet reshuffle, holding a referendum, a purge in an administration or what have you, an emergent problem in Lebanon may – with practically little or no stop-gaps in the system, as experience has repeatedly shown – be left unchecked, festering and

growing perhaps to the point of eventually bursting into no less than a national crisis. Pragmatically, the strongest evidence of the lack of sufficient resilience in the system applied in Lebanon, somewhat putting in question the very democracy of that system, is supplied by the current crisis. The problem, inasmuch as it is rooted in the question of confessionalism, is in reality as old as independent Lebanon. Characteristically, it was not nipped in the bud, but was allowed to fester, grow, and proliferate, culminating in 1975 in the outbreak of a civil strife of the bloodiest imaginable form.

Sectarianism has perhaps been the most debilitating challenge to democracy in Lebanon. The rigidity of the sectarian formula observed in the various realms of public life, at all levels of the political system as well as in the civil service, the military establishment, and the justice department, has been a stonewall barrier to equal opportunity and is inherently a contradiction in terms. Thus, regardless of your worth or qualifications, personal or professional, unless you are of a particular religious sect, you stand no chance – in Lebanon's kind of « democracy » – to reach a particular post, the key posts being reserved mostly for the Maronite Christians.

In Government, the President of the Republic should be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shi'i Muslim. The Cabinet seats are shared among six religious communities – or, in the largest cabinet imaginable, among seven of them – according to a rigid formula. The total number of officially recognized religious sects being seventeen, that leaves the top three posts in the political hierarchy out of reach for members of fourteen minority communities, and the cabinet seats unattainable for members of ten. One may imagine the kind of disenchantment, dissatisfaction, and frustration that such denial of equal opportunity may breed among those who feel under-privileged. This situation has been a factor in the radicalization of certain political initiatives or endeavors. This may explain, at least in part, why the more radical parties of the opposition are ordinarily led by members of the religious communities which are disqualified from the top three posts in Government. The rigid practice of assigning, even the non-political key posts in various branches of Government, to particular religious communities accounts to a large extent for the damage that sectarianism – through its negative impact on the officials' loyalties, morale, and motivation in various branches of government – has inflicted on the efficiency of the civil service and government-controlled public utilities. This phenomenon would even help to explain the fragility of the Lebanese Army in the face of any communal troubles, as the American administration should have learned the hard

way when it committed the Marines in the conflict on the side of the Lebanese Army.

In a nutshell, there is in Lebanon plenty of freedom, yet very little democracy.

Freedom in Jeopardy

Even the reference to freedom cannot be accepted without some significant qualification. There is indeed plenty of freedom in Lebanon in the context of what the system basically allows. In practice, however, the Lebanese individual—within a relatively large class of the people—enjoys little latitude for exercising it, fettered as he may be by the concerns of his less fortunate living conditions.

The brighter side of life in the capital, Beirut, before the crisis had only too often dimmed the real image of the rest of Lebanon. Only too often when reference was made to Lebanon, Beirut was really the object. The complimentary allusions made to Lebanon were mostly meant for Beirut, and more specifically the Greater Beirut area and its vicinity, rather than Lebanon proper. Such was obviously the case when admiration was frequently expressed for such things as Lebanon's vivacious, modern life-style, for its elegant hotels, night clubs, and restaurants, for its lively beaches and sedate green hills, for its cultural life, for its exposure to and interaction with the arts and cultures of East and West, for its prestigious schools and universities, for its dynamic banking system, for its various versatile service industries, for its active international airport and harbor. Obviously, none of this was relevant to the under-developed and under-privileged regions of the South, Akkar, and Bekaa. Even in the Greater Beirut area, there was on the eve of the crisis a chain of shanty towns encircling the city in what came to be known as the Misery Belt.

In the course of the conflict the Belt, particularly over stretches extending in East Beirut, was to be violently obliterated but the misery only to be aggravated and propagated. In fact, for a while, during the first few months of the crisis, it looked as though those shanty towns were prey to plans aiming at purging whole districts from the age-long religious admixture of people, perhaps—one may contend with the benefit of hindsight—in preparation for schemes to federalize Lebanon along sectarian lines.

The point I wish to make in this connection is simply that there might very well be a great deal of freedom afforded by the system, but also a large segment of the people is in no position to properly utilize this freedom. This disparity has always been, under the glittering

surface of prosperity and growth, a latently destabilizing factor in the Lebanese society.

Thus, the problem of Lebanon is deeply rooted in the system it has adopted since Independence in 1943, which is structured on tenuous, non-viable' sectarian foundations. The problem is, in other words, basically a domestic one.

The Domestic Problem : A Vehicle for Outside Intervention

The world has, however, become familiar with the Lebanese problem only through its regional and ultimately international dimensions, and only after it escalated to a point where it has come to pose a threat to regional, and hence to international peace. To say that the problem has deep - seated domestic roots is not to belittle the role of outside forces in the crisis. A number of points should rather be underlined in this respect.

The first is that the domestic differences have given rise to a latently explosive problem. This problem burst into violently open conflict when some outside potent factor acted as a catalyst. This was the case when the 1958 civil strife broke out concomitantly with the rise of Nasserist Arab Nationalism. This was again the case when the simmering turmoils of the late 1960's paralleled the rapid growth of the Palestinian armed resistance movement on Lebanese soil. It was also the case when, in 1975, the outbreak of hostilities apparently coincided with the peaking of Palestinian armed power in Lebanon. Too many people in Lebanon are prone now to blame their whole tribulation on outside strains and pressures, on foreign interventions in their affairs, or on other countries' plotting and scheming against them. There has been indeed a great deal of all that in recent years. Recognizing this, however, one should not lose sight of the fact that outside influences could not have infiltrated into the Lebanese scene, let alone play havoc with it, except through the cracks in the Lebanese fence arising from domestic differences. With time, the role of outside factors overshadowed that of domestic ones as superior foreign forces, even regular armies, got directly entangled in the struggle raging on Lebanese soil, including the Syrian Army, the Israeli Army, and for a while the American Marines along with other troops in the Multi - National Force. Obviously, while maintaining their catalyst role in the internal conflict, with much enhanced ability to play it actively and openly, outside forces have developed a direct role of their own in a regional conflict over Lebanese soil.

Israel's occupation of the South, which is now par excellence Lebanon's central preoccupation, marked the very culmination of

foreign involvement in the Lebanese crisis. The South now harbors practically all the strains and stresses of the Lebanese problem – all the schisms, feuds, and grievances – hosting all rampant factors in the Lebanese crisis, both domestic and foreign, and reflecting all the major concerns of the Lebanese about their future. The Lebanese are now very conscious of the fact that if there is going to be an end to their tribulation, the clue to the whole process, long and arduous as it may be, is to be sought in the South.

The Lebanese realize that if the Israelis succeed in chopping off the South, that will mark the end of Lebanon as a national entity and as a homeland. If the Israelis are allowed to appropriate the waters of the Litani river, as they have already set out to do, then the South, and hence Lebanon, will be deprived of a most vital life-line. If the Israelis go on with their endeavors to integrate the economy of the South with that of Israel, then Lebanon, besides losing valuable resources and potentials, will be pushed over the limit of dismemberment and irretrievably trapped in the very complex tangle of the Middle East syndrome. Besides, the Lebanese are terrified by the prospect that the opening of an economic window on Israel may force the closure of exceedingly vital gates with the Arab world. If the Israelis keep on playing their destabilizing, though subtle, game in the South through their Lebanese surrogates – as they are trying to do now under the banner of the so-called South Army – the South may quickly develop into an arena for a continuing civil strife of an apocalyptic order, which would inevitably continue to reverberate in the rest of the country, giving the ravaging crisis an indefinite lease of life.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I would emphasize the following main points :

- 1 — There is in Lebanon plenty of freedom, yet very little democracy.
- 2 — Democracy in Lebanon is handicapped by at least three factors, namely the nearly complete absence of accountability, the system's want of resilience, and the lack of equal opportunity. The rigidities of sectarianism might be the major factor underlying this state of affairs.
- 3 — Although freedoms abound in the system, for a relatively broad class of the people the access to freedom is rendered somewhat irrelevant by the strait jacket of misery and destitution engulfing them.
- 4 — The domestic conflict is rooted in basic differences among the

Lebanese over the failings and shortcomings of the system.

- 5 — Those differences were, in effect, the cracks in the Lebanese wall through which outside influences infiltrated to set off and constantly fuel the conflict.
- 6 — Although the Lebanese crisis has obvious domestic roots, yet the evolution of the struggle has attracted an increasingly greater role by outside forces. Gradually, the regional and international factors in the crisis have become the more predominant. This is now epitomized by Israel's occupation of the South (and part of the Beka' valley).
- 7 — The Liberation of the occupied territory is now Lebanon's foremost preoccupation. The main determinants of Lebanon's future - including its Arab affiliation, unity, and very survival - will largely depend on how the Israeli occupation of the South is approached and handled.
- 8 — The protracted violence has been so devastating to property, industry, utilities, and infrastructure, so damaging to inter-communal relations and inter-sectoral-business relations, and even to attitudes to social and human standards and values, that the very parameters of the basic system may now be in question. Hence, unless massive reconstruction is very quickly undertaken, which would be conceivable only with large-scale financial support from abroad, even the better side of the system, political, economic, and social, will be in serious jeopardy.